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The Oldest Well

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THE OLDEST WELL

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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This body of work, representing the past two years, is focused on the idea of the composite landscape. This reconfiguring of the elements from the external world combined with invented places is a way for me to articulate the subtle transactions between the interior psyche and the external world. The way this new conglomerate space is represented is a result of my inquiry into the relationship between nature, culture, and the sublime. The place where the private acts of the studio meet the shared exterior world is where I find my intellect, fantasy, and sense of reality collaborating in chorus.

Tacoma or Passaic?

I was born and raised in Tacoma, Washington. I never really thought of it as a beautiful city. Even now, when I visit I'm struck by the never-ending rows of car lots, generic architecture, and defunct industrial plants. Though Tacoma is going through a sort of urban renewal at the moment, Robert Smithson could have easily been describing Tacoma instead of Passaic in his famous essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey*. Smithson would posit that the Tacoma I was raised in was in a similar entropic state. Huge slabs of concrete for forgotten purposes, parking lots for closed industrial plants, and burnt out smokestacks were Tacoma's similar *monuments*, the physical embodiment of a tremendous amount of wasted energy.

However, the natural beauty that surrounds Tacoma is astounding. Mt. Rainier looms over the city like it is itself nature personified. This mountain is a place and an object at the same time. I've often reflected on how many times the mountain was reproduced on the cover of the newspaper just for being beautiful that day. Most likely there was just a lack of bad news to put on the cover, so the mountain was a stand-in for everything being all right with the world. My mother is not a negative person, but I distinctly remember her reminding me that if the mountain were to erupt we were directly in its path. She mentioned this from time to time. It might have been fresh in her mind considering Mt. St. Helens erupted on my brother's first communion, covering a large

portion of the Northwest in ash. It seemed that we were caught in the mountain's beautiful and dangerous gravitation, in the crosshairs of destruction. This image always stayed with me. The mountain could be both a sign of wellbeing and also the face of our disaster. For me, Mt. Rainier was sublime. Susan Glickman notes in her book on the poetics of the Canadian landscape that the poetry of the sublime "interested itself in how nature made one feel, as opposed to how it looked, what moral lessons it taught, or how it could be exploited to make a more comfortable life."[1]

> "The 'sublime' is an abstract quality in which the dominant feature is the presence or idea of transcendental immensity or greatness: power, heroism, or vastness in space or time. The sublime inspires awe and reverence, or possibly fear. It is not susceptible to objective measurement; rather, that feeling of being overwhelmed dislocates the rational observer"[2]

In the "Imagination of Disaster," an essay on science fiction movies, Susan Sontag explores our collective fascination with potential disaster.

> "Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror."[3]

Tacoma was just that, inconceivably banal and terrifying for it. In 1996 I was working in a video store in Tacoma, trapped in this banality. I was on a hiatus from studying art at the College of Santa Fe, aimless, and not sure what to do with my life. I received a call from a friend telling me about an opportunity to work as a sailor on a tall ship on the East Coast.

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[1] Susan Glickman, The Picturesque & the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape (McGill-Queens University Press, 1998), viii.
[2] Claudia Bell and John Lyall, The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism, and Identity (Praeger Publishers, 2002), 4.
[3] Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (Dell Publishing Co., Inc, 1966), 224.

Seven days later I was on a bus heading to Connecticut to begin a new life. In many ways I feel like this was the beginning of my adult life.

I had left school in Santa Fe feeling that I didn't have much life experience to draw from in my art. My life up to that point had been a steady regimented progression through public school. I wanted to live a life worthy of reflection, and simply moving from high school to college left me with an experience deficit. My adventures on the tall ship imbued me with a sense of scale in the world. Being a tiny speck on the ocean made the world seem expansive and somehow, simultaneously, it heightened my sense of presence in the world. In *Of Other Spaces*, Michel Foucault offers us this description of the 'boat' as a heterotopia, an *other* space. "[A]nd if we think, after all, that the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea."[4] This kind of boat brought me to find my wife and led me to Nova Scotia College of Art and Design where I received my BFA. I can't imagine my life having not made these decisions whose impact I was completely unaware of at the time. Arthur Danto describes the accidents and unforeseen events in ones life as part of a "crossed causal history."

> "What makes biography worth writing and reading are the accidents, the intersection of crossed causal histories that produce events not strictly predictable from either chain. Thus we say, 'as chance would have it, I did not go out for lunch that day,' or, 'on impulse, I decided to stop into the bookstore on my way downtown.' And in both cases something happened of immense importance to the speakers life which might have never taken place and never even been imagined."[5]

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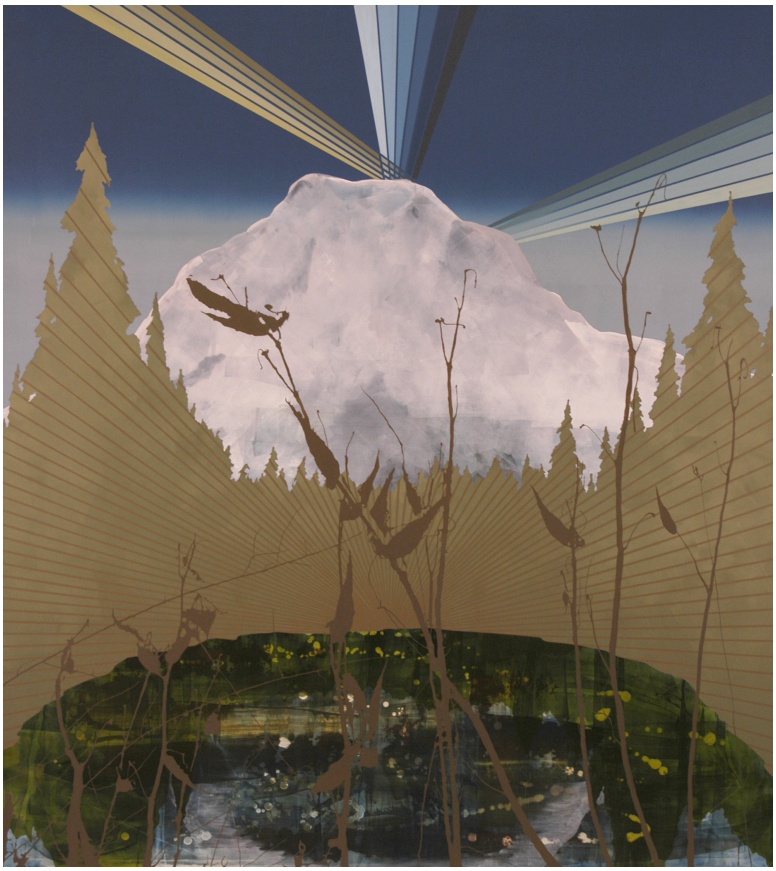
[4] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." Diacritics (1986).
[5] Arthur C. Danto, After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History (Princeton University Press, 1997), 41.

A thesis in art is unique in that it is a work and an appendix to work. In it engenders that the author looks back at his entire life history, his current ideas, philosophies, and his connection to his material means of expression. It is necessary to fully engage in such self-criticism to arrive at work of scrutinized value and meaning. The more I pursue the fantasy landscapes that I have been painting, the more I find I've been coming back to the peculiar sense of the world that I was imprinted with in Tacoma. I find it fascinating that travel seems to tell you as much about the place you're from as the place you are visiting. These paintings function like heterotopias for me. They are spaces that remove me from the banality of the world and offer a perspective back into the world. They function as new realities, "their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled."[6]

[6] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." Diacritics (1986).



(Figure 1) *In the Shadow of the Mountain*, 2005

My Painting (Structure)

"What is this thing built so solidly of Ghosts?"[7]

Since 2000 my painting has taken the form of the visual composite. My work has become focused on landscape painting visually pieced together from different places and times to create new unified scenes. This piecemeal approach is indicative of the media-saturated world that we inhabit where time and space are more fluid concepts than at any other time in history. We live amongst a confluence of architecture from different periods and styles, people of many different customs, and images of every possible origin and motivation. The visual collage of painted fragments is an important part of my process and reflects this diversity of imagery, some experienced first hand and some more mediated. Foucault's third principle of the heterotopia states that "[t]he heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."[8] My paintings conflate multiple locations and times to present new and impossible vantages. They are a tangible means to an elusive end.[9]

Landscape is in itself a cultural construction. It is the application of our own emotional states, histories, and expectations onto our surroundings. In *Landscape and*

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[7] William H. Gass, Finding a Form (Knopf, 1996), 298.
[8] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces." Diacritics (1986).
[9] Zygmunt Bauman, Globalization: The Human Consequences (Columbia University Press, 1998)

Memory, Simon Schama states, "it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape."[10] He continues:

> "For although we are accustomed to separate nature and human perception into two realms, they are, in fact indivisible. Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is a work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock."[11]

My visual source material is built up from my own travels, invented fantasy landscapes, and found images, both historical and contemporary. These images are not only arranged on canvases, but also projected by my mind on the spaces I move through. They are the raw material that shapes my accumulating perception of the world. Memory, image, and present reality constantly collide into new crossed causal realities. My movements through space become a process of gathering and reimaging. In *The Accelerated Sublime; Landscape, Tourism, and Identity*, the authors Claudia Bell and John Lyall describe travel as an ephemeral consumable.[12] This seems an apt metaphor for the way we ingest and reprocess our experiences of the world. In addition, the structure of my paintings are conceptual maps of my movements both literally, in the procurement of images from travel, and also figuratively, as the movement of thought in my work. The paintings are subject to the same crossed causal histories that shape my life. They are a record of the conditions of their own making, which include economic, ideological, and spatial conditions. When I travel I often take photographs for the expressed intent of using

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[10] Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (Knopf, 1995), 10.
[11] Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (Knopf, 1995), 6-7.
[12] Claudia Bell and John Lyall, The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism, and Identity (Praeger Publishers, 2002), 3.

them in painting. This encourages me to look at the environment as fragmentary and from forced perspectives. I often have to shoot photos from uncomfortable viewpoints to isolate the fragment that I'm interested in. "But of course the very act of identifying (not to mention photographing) the place presupposes our presence, and along with us all the heavy cultural backpacks that we lug with us on the trail."[13]

In the studio these fragments and disparate elements are arranged to create new hybrids. There is a sense of the natural mixed with the mediated and arranged. I liken the process to building visual dioramas that imbue these bucolic scenes with an air of human intervention. The fragments are visually stacked to create the illusion of space yet there is often a shifting focus between layers that resembles the way binoculars fracture the landscape into distinct focal planes. This gives the images a paradoxical feeling of expansiveness and flatness. The control and separation of the landscape into these planes brings human order to the unruly environment.

While these paintings presuppose human presence they are devoid of such overt evidence. In this way they present a paradox that shares the methodology of many travel brochures. The absence of people invites the viewers to project themselves into the scene.

> "The landscape displayed in tourist brochures are often without people. Pristine nature is glossily presented as having empty space into which to escape. Where people are present in these representations they are likely to be tourists rather than locals, inviting the potential traveler to put themselves into the picture. Even the most cursory analysis of travel brochures reveals an enthusiastic escapist tone, an offer of a memorable

[13] Simon Schama, Landscape and Memory (Knopf, 1995), 7.

> experience in nature as compensation for the daily grind of the commercial urban world."[14]

This is one reason that I leave the overt evidence of human occupation out of this work. This absence suppresses their reading as narrative and creates space for the entry of the viewer into the work. Narrative is present but not overtly linked to a causal chain of events. The scene is encountered as a pervasive condition.

[14] Claudia Bell and John Lyall, The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape, Tourism, and Identity (Praeger Publishers, 2002), 3.

(Figure 2) *Ghostland*, 2006

The Grid and the Ruin

One idea that has captured my interest has been the aesthetic of the ruin. The ruin is an apt example of the sublime. The ruin is human history overcome by nature. It's a reminder of the transience of culture and nature's inevitable continuance.

> " In the eighteenth century, the ruin is an image both of natural disaster and of the catastrophes of human history. In fact, it is difficult to tell the two apart. The aesthetics of the sublime is in part an effort to name the confusion that comes over us when faced with the wholesale destruction: we experience storms, battles, earthquakes, and revolutions as equally impressive facts of both nature and history."[15]

Humans walk a very fine line between conceiving of themselves as stewards of the environment and exploiters of its resources. "We tend to stand uneasily between unadulterated Nature on the one hand and total Culture on the other, as though on a teeter."[16] Contemporary culture often sees itself as separate from the natural world. We try to control the environment though the illusion of prediction and the construction of order. Roxy Paines' *Bad Lawn* (1998) is a wonderful example of the clash between nature and culture. In this sculpture he fabricates a simile of the antithesis of the ideal suburban lawn. It's replete with every kind of weed, blight, and imperfection that the ideal lawn would be free of. This work heightens our sense of nature gone awry though the disruptive factor is nature itself. The suburban lawn is an exemplary example of the desire of control over

[15] Dillon, Brian. "Fragments from a History of Ruin." Cabinet 20 (2005), 55.

nature. In this light *Bad Lawn* is a reminder of how nature is classified in accordance with culture's needs or ideals. The suburban lawn can be seen as nature fractured and then enslaved.[17]

Artists have a long history of shaping the cultural view of nature as well as exerting visual control of the world at large. Artists have long tried to capture the world and crystallize its image in artwork. I am fascinated by the way in which many Renaissance paintings overtly show the use of perspective drawing. Even in depictions of humble mangers, calculated grids can be seen receding toward distant vanishing points. Such paintings reveal the human habit of dividing the world into digestible parts and imposing mathematical order on the natural world. This Cartesian approach highlights the tension between scientific divinity and human experience. Perspective is negated both by our anatomy, having binocular vision, and by our constant motion. The certainty of perspective is only possible through a strict adherence to certain conditions or though the use of a machine such as a camera.

The built environment is almost always built on a grid. It would seem that the grid is an inextricable part of human culture. It has always amazed me that we project this *flat* grid so pervasively on a *round* planet. Rosalind Krauss illustrates the distinction between the world of matter and the world of order personified in the grid.

> "The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection, emphasizes not only its anti-referential character, but – more importantly – its hostility to narrative. This structure, impervious both to time and to incident, will not permit the projection of language into the domain of the

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[16] William H. Gass, Finding a Form (Knopf, 1996), 262.
[17] Dr. Michael Welton, email to Saul Becker, April 17, 2006.

> visual, and the result is silence. This silence is not due simply to the extreme effectiveness of the grid as a barricade against speech, but to the protectiveness of its mesh against all intrusions from the outside. No echoes of footsteps in empty rooms, no scream of birds across open skies, no rush of distant water – for the grid has collapsed the spatiality of nature onto the bounded surface of the purely cultural object."[18]

The grid cannot be attributed to the discovery of one person which heightens the sense of its pervasiveness as though it were a condition similar to nature, its order pre-existing the humanity that created it. In my paintings I co-opt the grid's silence to heighten the sense of entropy in the landscape. My vistas are deafeningly silent, drawing attention to their stasis. In works such as *Vista* (2006) I represent a reversal of the relationship between the grid, as purely cultured object, and the environment. The grid is depicted as a preexisting element; its features are excavated as though this pervasive order were a natural condition. The scrubby brush in the foreground, a stand-in for nature, becomes the out-of-place element, pushed to the edge of the picture pane.

Robert Smithson describes the idea of the ruin a little differently. His idea puts the ruin in reverse, envisioning the process of construction as a geological disruption. In his view, "*ruins in reverse*, that is – all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin' because the buildings don't *fall* into ruin *after* they are built but rather *rise* into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic *mise-en-scene* suggests the discredited idea of *time* and many other 'out of date' things."[19] For

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[18] Rosalind E. Krauss, The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (MIT Press, 1985), 158.
[19] Nancy Holt, The Writings of Robert Smithson (New York University Press, 1979), 54-55.

Smithson, time was on a very different scale. Not only was he interested in cultural "elsewhere's," but also temporal "elsewhere's." Geological time, nature's time was his concern and this connects his work with the notions of the ruin. The juxtaposition of culture's time and nature's time result in evidencing one side's ultimate victory. In works such as *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970), Smithson created a modern ruin and a sublime allusion to the power of nature and its processes. This project tipped the balance between building and disorder, nature and construction. By loading twenty truckloads of soil on the roof of a derelict woodshed on the campus of Kent State University, Smithson accelerated the process of a building returning to the soil and in doing so created a contemporary ruin. This work was left to deteriorate in the elements in stark contrast with repression of time attempted by the strict conservation of most art. Mike Davis devotes a chapter in his book *Dead Cities* to literary examples in fiction dealing with nature reclaiming major metropolitan cities such as London. These works go into great detail of the destruction of the city through the processes of nature describing the return of displaced animal species and their adaptation of the cities structures. Examples of this can be seen presently in cities like Detroit where fully mature fruit trees are growing out of the charred remains of houses within the city. This kind of return of nature is often labeled neglect. In Susan Sontag's description of science fiction plots and conventions she comments: "Science fiction films are not about science. They are about disaster, which is one of the oldest subjects of art." My work depicts the natural world in a modality in contrast with the usual depiction of nature as picturesque. Even in contrast with usual depictions of the sublime, my work seeks a reversal. Nature is the ruin; its layers of rock, and bodies of water, and foliage are

imprinted with culture's wear. Not the Garden of Eden, but a post-industrial, post human state of shock. By depicting the environment as contaminated, burnt out, exhausted, and obsolete it becomes the ruin, a sublime landscape. This inversion transforms the picturesque view of the landscape into an enigmatic landscape, a product of culture in the absence of that very culture that had such an affect on it. These paintings then function as heterotopias. From their unique *otherness* we can then have a view back into our contemporary relationship with nature. They reflect on our collective anxiety about the future of our environment in the face of ecological concerns, political extremism, and nuclear threats associated with terrorism. It is interesting to note that on the loan agreement for my thesis exhibition at the Anderson Gallery has the following exclusions regarding insurance. "The Anderson Gallery fine-arts policy contains the usual exclusions for loss or damage due to war, invasion, hostilities, rebellion, insurrection, confiscation by order of any government or public authority, nuclear damage, wear and tear, gradual deterioration, moths, vermin, and inherent vice."[20] Though these threats render humanity's future uncertain, I portray nature in continuity. However stunted and entropic the landscape might become, I still portray it as beautiful and permanent. In works such as *Red Tide* (fig.3), the sea is an unnatural color, red like blood or iron ore. The thistles in the foreground seem to glow as though irradiated. *Red Tide* also makes reference to my childhood in that a red tide is a bloom of poisonous microscopic marine algae, which affects the oysters near my family's cabin in the Hood Canal making them inedible at times.

[20] Anderson Gallery *Loan Agreement*

The environment in my work often appears to be entropic and static, like a stage set with all the actors on a break. The evidence of humanity is rarely overt, except within the depiction of nature itself. The way I render the environment often recalls the marks found in wood engravings. This mark-making technique is way for me to reiterate that these scenes are constructions not illusions of real space.

(Figure 3) *Red Tide*, 2005

The Future: Hinterland

The paintings and ideas discussed in this thesis have followed each other like a relay race. The paintings have developed intuitively, without overlying intellectual intentions, which are then followed by a period of reflection and digestion. The ideas are partially flushed out and examined, and a period of refining begins. The developed ideas and research then push and aid the painting's development. I expect that in the near future my studio practice will reenter the more intuitive and exploratory phase. This is not a preconceived regimen, but an observation on a practice that has been evolving in my studio for over ten years now. When I was living on a sailboat in the Atlantic, I learned within a certain amount of error, to be able to forecast the weather by the color of the ocean. This evolved from a sense of present-ness with my environment and continues with the same sense in my studio practice. I keep myself on a transitional edge where I have to react to shifting ground, ideas, and modes. If I find myself in familiar territory I get anxious and look for transition, a growing edge. It seems that I'm more comfortable in an area that is not visible or known, a hinterland. Jean-Paul Sartre calls the refusal to be any particular thing being truly human.[21] It is this lack of strict definition in people and their relationships with nature that constitutes a growing edge of discovery. I hope to continue drawing from the well of this investigation, letting some water spill from time to time.

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[21] Arthur C. Danto, After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History (Princeton University Press, 1997), 129.

(Figure 4) Installation View, Anderson Gallery, April 2006

(Figure 5) Installation View, Anderson Gallery, April 2006

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VITA

Saul Becker was born in Tacoma, Washington, a not very beautiful blue-collar city surrounded by astounding natural beauty, in 1975. The younger sibling of a handicapped brother, Saul had the unusual dual role of both older and younger brother wrapped into one. After graduating high school he spent a semester studying art at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico. Deciding that the education he really desired was a little less structured, Saul took a break from school and traveled the US and Canada as a sailor and instructor on a three-masted tall ship and later apprenticed as a boat builder in Tacoma, WA. After crossing the country a dozen times he resumed his art studies at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, Nova Scotia. After spending eight months in Portugal as an exchange student at ARCO in Lisbon, Saul returned to NSCAD where he received his BFA in 2000. Between 2000 and 2004 Saul maintained an active exhibition record in Seattle, Washington where he and his wife had settled. Among the exhibitions between these years have included the King County Art Gallery in Seattle, The Tacoma Art Museum, and Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. Saul was accepted into the MFA program at VCU and relocated to Richmond in 2004. In 2005 Saul spent a semester away as an artist in residence at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha, Nebraska. In 2006 he received his MFA in painting from VCU. In the summer of 2006 he and his wife are embarking on yet another adventure, beginning a new life in New York City.